

135 Patient transport blasted

State's new Medicaid system puts people at risk, doctors, witnesses say at hearing

By Liv Osby

HEALTH WRITER

losby@greenvillenews.com

The first time Charles Mosteller called the state's new Medicaid transport system to get his ailing 73-year-old father a ride to the doctor, the driver arrived 90 minutes late.

The second time, the driver was so late, he called to cancel.

And the third time, he said, he waited with his father at the side of the road, but no one showed up at all.

"It's nothing short of a nightmare," the Travelers Rest man said.

One of Dr. Keith Guest's patients, a woman with cerebral palsy, was dropped off for her doctor's appointment 90 minutes late and left in her wheel-

chair outside in the heat.

"Patients are suffering," said Guest, president of the American Medical Directors Association, which represents medical directors of long-term care facilities. "I'm concerned there will be worse outcomes and people will die."

See **PATIENT** on page 5A

PATIENT

FROM PAGE 1A

The men testified Monday before a packed Greenville County Council chamber at a hearing called by Lt. Gov. Andre Bauer, head of the state's Office on Aging, to learn about problems with the new transport system.

And according to those who spoke, it's left elderly and disabled people outdoors waiting for a ride to the doctor, arriving hours after their appointments, or with no ride at all.

"These are 80-year-olds being dropped off at the curb in wheelchairs to find their way in the heat to the doctor's office," said Randy Lee, president of the South Carolina Healthcare Association, which represents for-profit nursing homes in the state. "This is a failed transportation system."

Previously, the state Department of Health and Human Services, which administers the Medicaid program, contracted with county agencies, who sub-contracted with transportation companies to provide services for non-emergencies, like doctor appointments and adult day care, said Office on Aging spokesman Frank Adams.

But May 1, it began contracting with two "brokers" of transportation services who in turn dispatch local transportation companies with whom they sub-contract, he said.

"We began hearing from people saying their parents were being treated in an unsafe manner," he said.

DHHS spokesman Jeff Stensland said the agency switched to a broker system, which is used by more than 20 states, to en-

hance accountability and efficiency. The old system was plagued by high costs, fraud and abuse, he said.

Some transport companies were overbilling and padding their mileage and knowingly using ambulances when they weren't warranted instead of wheelchair vans, he said.

The average cost of non-emergency ambulance transport is \$153 per trip, compared with wheelchair van transport, which is \$39, he said, noting the cost of the service grew 50 percent to \$42.8 million from 2002 to 2006.

Stensland added that as of this month, the state has nine active fraud investigations involving transport companies and another three due to begin soon.

Last March, Forest Thomas, former owner of Northern Anderson County EMS, pleaded guilty to filing false Medicaid claims and agreed to make restitution of \$463,823 to the department.

Stensland said DHHS expected some initial problems but believes they will decline. And performance standards are built into the contracts, allowing for termination, he said, noting the first evaluation is due this fall.

"We take these complaints very seriously," he said. "But we'd like to give the system a chance to work first."

Stensland said 499 complaints were filed against Medical Transport Management Inc., of Missouri, in May, about 1 percent of its 47,534 trips, and 259 complaints against LogistiCare in May, less than 1 percent of its 148,000 trips. In June, there were 134 complaints out of 140,000 trips against LogistiCare, he said. June numbers weren't available for MTM.

Ray Williams, senior vice president of public affairs for Atlanta-based LogistiCare, said the company takes complaints seriously and works to rectify them. He said some of the problems can be attributed to the start-up of services and that staffers have worked tirelessly to make the partnership work.

"Our goal is to ensure each trip is done well," he said.

Sandra Spooner, communication specialist with MTM, said via e-mail that her company regrets any inconvenience experienced by patients and their caregivers and that MTM is working with providers to address all service issues.

"MTM has been hired to ensure Medicaid recipients travel via the most appropriate mode of transportation," she said. "This transition has increased the number of transports these providers handle, which has caused some bumps along the way," including the need to buy new vehicles and hire new driv-





ers.

But at least so far, said Greenville geriatrician Dr. William C. Logan Jr., the system has descended into "bargain-basement" transportation that's resulted in curb-to-curb service instead of bed-to-bed service for many patients. And delayed transportation has had a domino effect on health-care providers as well, he said.

Others added they spend 20-25 minutes on hold to schedule pickups and that there is no accountability.

Bauer said he believes the switch was well-intentioned but will cost taxpayers \$9 million to

\$14 million more a year.

"The best I can decipher is there was an idea to try and stretch the taxpayer's dollar to provide services to more folks, which is what we all want to accomplish in state government," he said.

"But along the way some out-of-state groups were awarded contracts for five years, actually with additional funding, but people aren't getting the level of service that should be expected."

Stensland said the contract calls for spending a maximum of \$250 million over five years, though it could be less because

payment will be based on the number of people eligible, instead of mileage. Some 80,000 people received transportation services last year, he said.

Bauer said the state needs to ensure better service or find a way out of the contract.

Rep. Dennis C. Moss, D-Cherokee, said the Legislative Audit Committee is deciding whether to audit the new plan, and Sen. Harvey Peeler is holding a hearing about it before the Senate Medical Affairs Committee on Wednesday.

"It's a big problem," Bauer said. "We need to look at what can we do to make it better."

Greenville News
Greenville, SC
Circ. 91228
From Page:
5
7/17/2007
61018



Photos by OWEN RILEY JR. /Staff

Unhappy: Charles Mosteller, upset about transportation issues regarding his elderly father, speaks at a hearing before the South Carolina Office on Aging at Greenville County Square on Monday morning. Right, people listen to the discussion of the state's new Medicaid patient transportation system.

